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High Noon (1952): Fred Zinnemann and the Hawks/Wayne Backlash

It had been twelve years since the release of *High Noon*, and Fred Zinnemann was getting fed up. For over a decade now, he had had to stand by and watch helplessly as his masterpiece was subjected to one of the harshest backlashes in the history of film criticism. Francois Truffaut had called it "facetious". Manny Farber had dismissed it as "white elephant art". Then, director Howard Hawks, upon finishing *Rio Bravo* in 1959, raised eyebrows after proudly stating, "I made *Rio Bravo* because I didn't like *High Noon*... I didn't think a good town marshal was going to run around town like a chicken with his head cut off asking everyone to help. And who saves him? His Quaker wife. That isn't my idea of a good Western."



Finally, Zinnemann could not take it anymore. In an interview with James R. Silke in 1964, Zinnemann responded to Hawks' criticisms with an anguished rebuttal: "I admire Hawks very much. I only wish he'd leave my films *ALONE!*" Zinnemann was puzzled as to why so many critics over the years were starting to complain that *High Noon* centered on a protagonist—Marshall Will Kane—who behaved more like a human everyman than a traditional, all-powerful Western icon. "If you say this is not a Western character," Zinnemann retorted, "it's true. I wasn't there in 1860. Neither was Mr. Hawks."

Zinnemann would spend his whole career defending *High Noon* as a film that stressed a universal theme: a simple story about the individual pitted against an overwhelming majority. As he later described the film in his 1992 autobiography, "It is a story that still happens everywhere, every day." Indeed, this was the kind of theme that dominated all of Zinnemann's greatest films, from the paranoid POW escapees of *Act of Violence* (1949) to the impoverished pioneers of *The Sundowners* (1960); from Thomas More's hopeless fight for justice in *A Man for All Seasons* (1966) to a love triangle tested by the icy crevices of the Alps in *Five Days One Summer* (1982). It was an overlooked filmmaking career, founded on an underlying sympathy for the underdog; after *High Noon*, everyone in Hollywood would remember Fred Zinnemann's name.

Today, it is fashionable to think of *High Noon* as dated and worthless—a film that still has the AFI and the Academy Awards on its side, but not much else. Jonathan Rosenbaum once called it "vastly overrated," and Roger Ebert confessed as recently as 2007 that it's a film he "doesn't like very much." Much of the recent dislike for the film appears to stem from a bizarre insistence by critics to cite Howard Hawks and John Wayne's own criticisms of the film. In his Great Movies essay on *Rio Bravo*, Ebert had attempted to pan *High Noon* by quoting from his 1972 interview with Wayne, who sputtered, "What a piece of you-know-what that was! Here's a town full of people who have ridden in covered wagons all the way across the plains... and then when three no-good bad guys walk into town and the marshal asks for a little help, everybody in town gets shy. If I'd been the marshal, I would have been so goddamned

disgusted with those chicken-livered yellow sons of bitches that I would have just taken my wife and saddled up and rode out of there.”

What Ebert seems not to have realized is that John Wayne actually had a more personal reason for disliking *High Noon*, a reason which he rarely expressed in public: the fact that the film's screenplay was written by Carl Foreman, a former Communist who had been blacklisted by the House Un-American Activities Committee, which Wayne had proudly supported. Foreman made it no secret that *High Noon* was basically his allegorical slap at McCarthyism; Wayne was reportedly so outraged by Foreman's intentions that he criticized *High Noon* as “the most un-American thing I've ever seen in my whole life!” Both Wayne and Howard Hawks felt that the movie violated their macho code of honor; they believed there was something fundamentally wrong with making a Western about a hero who was capable of feeling fear. Here was Gary Cooper playing a decidedly anti-Gary Cooper character: Will Kane, frightened town marshal, ostracized authority figure, humiliated husband. Something was happening here. Something about the Western was about to change forever.

Another problem with Wayne's criticism of *High Noon* was his charge that Kane could simply leave town, rather than staying and facing the evil Frank Miller and his gang. But the thing is, Kane *can't* just get out of town. He and his wife, Amy (Grace Kelly), are planning on opening up a general store once they find a place to settle, and they can't risk the possibility of Miller's gang tracking them down. “We'd never be able to keep that store, Amy,” Kane reminds his wife. “They'd come after us, and we'd have to run again—as long as we live.” The fact that Kane will also have to turn in his badge and guns if he leaves town poses another problem: how could he possibly fight Miller outside of town without his authority? Or without guns? The whole *point* of Foreman's screenplay is that it's designed specifically to ensure that Kane has no alternatives. He's got to stay.

Nobody in town is willing to help him. Everybody has some kind of excuse. Martin (Lon Chaney Jr.), the retired town marshal, says he can't assist Kane because of his arthritis and complains, “People got to talk themselves into law and order before they do anything about it, maybe because deep down they don't care. They just don't care.” Harv Pell (Lloyd Bridges) won't help him because of a jealous intuition that Kane has feelings for his girlfriend, Helen Ramirez (Katy Jurado), and vice versa. The town judge (Otto Kruger), who sent Miller to prison, hurriedly leaves town and takes the city hall American flag with him, thus stripping the town of all its democracy. Mayor Henderson (Thomas Mitchell) deprives Kane of any possible allies by seducing an audience of churchgoers with a speech about how blood in the streets might do significant damage to the town's economy and tourism. Even Amy turns her back on Kane; both her father and her brother were casualties of gun violence and, as a Quaker, she refuses to stand by her husband as long as he continues to fight.

Because the movie questions pacifism as an alternative, *High Noon* is sometimes dismissed as an apologia for violence, but a deeper reading indicates that the film's violence doesn't come easy. For one thing, Foreman's screenplay offers an insightful (if often-missed) critique of the death penalty. At first, Kane is bitter about Frank Miller going to prison instead of the gallows,

but then considers the possibility of Miller returning to town nonviolently: “Sometimes prison *changes* a man...” In another scene, when the local bartender (Larry J. Blake) cracks jokes about Miller shooting Kane dead, an enraged Kane knocks the bartender to the ground, then feels bad about it and tries to help him up. This scene critiques the myth of the marshal as a slap-happy, vigilante Western hero. And out of all the people refusing to help Kane, the local minister (Morgan Farley) is perhaps the only man in town with a good excuse: “If you’re asking me to tell my people to go out and kill, and maybe get themselves killed... I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry.”

The film’s long-awaited finale, in which Kane prepares anxiously for Miller’s arrival, is developed by Zinnemann with a montage defined by three lingering visual elements.

The first element is the sense of urgency, symbolized by obsessive close-ups of the many clocks in town, all of which seem to get ominously larger as the noon train approaches.

The second element is the film’s victim, Kane, walking helplessly through the streets before stopping and being regarded in a rising crane-shot of the entire town; Zinnemann achieved this complex shot through the use of a long Chapman crane.

The third and final integral element to the film’s visual style is the railroad tracks themselves. They are always static, always threatening, always waiting patiently for Miller’s train. When the train finally does arrive, it chugs black smoke and blows a loud whistle, reminding us of the train in the finale of Zinnemann’s *Act of Violence*. And when we finally see Frank Miller (Ian MacDonald), he has the face of a Tin Man and the burning revenge fantasies of your typical Zinnemann-esque villain. He is flanked by three bad guys: Pierce (Robert J. Wilke), the second-in-command; Colby (Lee Van Cleef), silent but deadly; and Ben Miller (Sheb Wooley), who is loud, horny and reckless—and, naturally, is the first one to die.



Zinnemann did not agree with Carl Foreman that that the story was an allegory for McCarthyism. “With all due respect, I felt this to be a narrow point of view,” the director wrote in his autobiography. “To me it was the story of a man who must make a decision according to his conscience.” Nevertheless, Zinnemann, like Foreman, became embroiled in the controversies surrounding the film. During a disastrous screening in July 1952, Zinnemann’s son, Tim, overheard an executive in the bathroom muttering, “What does a European Jew know about making Westerns, anyway?” And the debate over the film’s allegorical subtext has always refused to go away. Although some conservatives—indeed, the film’s own star, Gary Cooper—admired Carl Foreman’s insights into violence, patriotism and human weakness, other conservatives cried foul. Howard Hawks and John Wayne took their hatred of the film to their graves. There is still a temptation today to compare *High Noon* to *Rio Bravo* and determine whether or not one film is better than the other.

Why do we have to choose between the two films? *Rio Bravo* is one kind of Western. *High Noon* is another. *Rio Bravo* is a triumph of invisible style; *High Noon* is a triumph of real-time, documentary style. Hawks specialized in films about professionals; Zinnemann specialized in films about characters suffering a crisis of conscience. One film was a love letter to Westerns as they used to be; another film marked an attempt to bring Westerns into strange, unfamiliar territory. A marshal like John T. Chance knew exactly what he was doing. A marshal like Will Kane makes it all up as he goes along.

High Noon is one of the best movies ever made. That much must be said, right now, in case it isn't clear. In the end, Fred Zinnemann delivered a film that was meditative, innovative, and just as American as apple pie. It was true to the complex feelings that all gunslingers have ever shared in the Old West (and beyond). It still has relevance for all parties—whether you're liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, Green or Libertarian. One way or another, you're guaranteed to find something to love about this story. Take your pick and choose your villains. This is a movie for everyone. Source: iceboxmovies.com